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Chairman: Mr. Busacca ..... (Italy)

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Agenda item 107: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Questions relating to refugees, returnees and displaced persons and humanitarian questions (*continued*)

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The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Agenda item 107: Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Questions relating to refugees, returnees and displaced persons and humanitarian questions (*continued*) (A/52/12 and Add.1, A/52/97, A/52/116-S/1997/37, A/52/273, 274 and Corr.1 and 360).

1. **Mr. Gogoberidze** (Georgia) said that his Government attached overriding importance to the refugee problem, since Georgia had been seriously affected by flows of internally displaced persons and refugees as a result of armed conflicts in its separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Despite the difficulties of the transitional period, Georgia had accomplished major progress in establishing democratic institutions and stabilizing the growth of its economy. Regrettably, the acute refugee problem and the lack of unified international efforts to resolve it were draining Georgia's resources, upsetting its development plans and threatening the integrity of fledgling institutions.

2. Two hundred ninety thousand refugees and displaced persons, of whom 95,000 were children, were scattered across Georgia, living in dire conditions. Access to food was limited and there was widespread poverty; the strains of war and subsequent isolation had had a traumatic psychological impact on children and adults alike.

3. His Government was concerned at the plight of children, especially at the growing number of street children in Tbilisi, where they were in danger of becoming involved in various illegal activities.

4. Prompted by severe living conditions, some refugees had voluntarily returned to their homes in Abkhazia, where they had to endure humiliation and constant threats on the part of its separatist leadership.

5. His Government believed that comprehensive regional approaches could significantly contribute to the international community's humanitarian efforts. The Regional Conference on refugees and displaced persons in the Commonwealth of Independent States and relevant neighbouring States held in Geneva in 1996, which had adopted a Programme of Action, had resulted in the scope of activities of UNHCR being expanded to the problems of deported and internally displaced persons. His delegation was confident that the outcome of the Conference would lead to a series of practical steps, allowing States of the region to cope better with those problems. Funding of assistance programmes by donor States would ensure the implementation of the Programme of Action.

6. **Mr. Oda** (Egypt) said that the international community faced many complex challenges in seeking to protect refugees and displaced persons and facilitate their voluntary repatriation. The changing nature of conflicts, involving increasing numbers of violations of civilians' human rights, made that task more difficult. His delegation supported the principle of voluntary repatriation, as well as the right to legal recourse against those responsible for human rights violations against refugees, immigrants and displaced persons.

7. The key to solving the problem of return and ensuring the economic and social reintegration of refugees lay in regional cooperation between the States concerned, and international cooperation between United Nations agencies, particularly UNHCR, and the various aid organizations in the field.

8. While welcoming the findings in the report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (A/52/12 and Add.1) concerning the reduction in global refugee figures and the absence of massive influxes in 1996 and the first quarter of 1997 (paras. 1 and 2), his delegation wondered whether account had been taken of the situation in the Great Lakes region of Africa, where a deteriorating security situation had resulted in enormous numbers of refugees.

9. The international community, although supported by numerous legal instruments, had still much to do to find durable solutions. His delegation commended the coordinating work of UNHCR in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and believed that high priority should be given to the safe return of all refugees, including Palestinian refugees, and compensation for losses incurred as a result of expulsion, displacement or occupation.

10. More needed to be done to address refugee problems in Africa, which constituted a major obstacle to sustainable development. Protection should be afforded to humanitarian aid workers and other agency personnel, while parties to disputes should not be allowed to use refugees as "weapons". Agencies should be guaranteed access to refugees and integrated approaches should be devised to humanitarian work, with the full participation of all concerned. In addition, Member States should strengthen UNHCR and aid agencies by providing them with moral and material support.

11. **Archbishop Martino** (Observer for the Holy See) said that the current year had started with horrifying scenes of internally displaced persons and refugees in the Great Lakes region, but as time passed, concern for those people had diminished and "business as usual" had resumed. They seemed to be forgotten.

12. Refugees too often found themselves in a situation that was worse than the one which had forced them from their homes, in overcrowded camps, without safe water, with inadequate or non-existent sanitation facilities, little food, and with medical assistance sometimes limited to reproductive health measures including abortion-related procedures. The Holy See noted with concern that attempts were being made in the refugee camps to implement population policies which seemed to follow incorrect interpretations of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, which gave a place to abortion within population activities.

13. Children who had become victims of war and found shelter in refugee camps had the right not only to personal security but also to a minimum of education; they must be given the chance to do something useful for their future lives.

14. The following were among the heartbreaking dimensions of the refugee problem: refugees were no longer by-products of conflicts but were often the very objects of them; the majority of refugees were innocent civilians, 80 per cent of whom were women and children; almost 90 per cent of refugees lived in developing countries; humanitarian aid could be extremely difficult to deliver because of the reluctance of certain regimes to admit such aid, and because aid workers themselves often became the victims of violence; a considerable number of refugees were killed by starvation, epidemics or landmines; many of the richer countries closed their doors to refugees, and developing countries were often overburdened by their prolonged stay; some Governments resisted the return of refugees to their homelands, and in some host countries forced repatriation became standard practice, even at gunpoint.

15. Over 50 million people were crying out to the world's conscience for justice; they wanted to exercise their right to life, in a home and in a country. But a durable solution remained out of reach, perhaps because refugees were not the first priority for the international community. The situation confronted the world with a triple challenge: the need for humanitarian action, political action and solidarity. The commitment shown by humanitarian aid workers who risked their own lives in adverse situations was a testament to the dignity of the human person. The dedicated work of UNHCR, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and numerous other non-governmental organizations was to be highly commended.

16. More than ever, stress should be placed upon the causes of the problem and on its global nature. More effective preventive mechanisms must be established; actions must be based on a new concept of security and development; more attention must be given to assuring the effective respect of human rights and democratic practices; and vigilance must be shown regarding economic and ecological balances. The legitimate practice of asylum needed to be re-examined as a solution.

17. The fundamental challenge was that of solidarity. With a greater awareness of the unity of the human family, an increased spirit of solidarity would develop and a hospitable mentality would brush aside all arguments that fed only on fear and egoism. The greatest tragedy of all the human tragedies of our time must find an end soon.

18. **Mr. d'Escragnolle-Taunay** (Brazil) said that his delegation, while welcoming recent positive developments as described in the High Commissioner's report (A/52/12 and Add.1), also shared the High Commissioner's deep concern regarding the increasingly restrictive trends in the granting of asylum.

19. Brazil subscribed fully, and without reservations, to the main international legal instruments concerning refugees. The provisions of such instruments should be applied, in principle, to the protection of persons persecuted for reasons related to race, religion, politics or nationality. Brazil had expanded its interpretation of those instruments to include protection of all individuals fleeing from situations of open violence within and between States. Seventy per cent of refugees currently living in Brazil were victims of civil wars.

20. To seek and be granted refugee status was a fundamental human right of those escaping from persecution. His delegation urged all countries which had not yet done so to become parties to the Convention on the Status of Refugees of 1951 and its Protocol of 1967 and to take into consideration the relevant resolutions of the United Nations and other multilateral forums. The international community must strengthen the institution of refugee status and the principle of non-refoulement, the two pillars of international protection.

21. Brazil recognized the clear linkage between human rights violations and refugee flows, and supported increased cooperation between UNHCR and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The search by UNHCR for long-standing solutions merited support, but equal attention should also be paid to the underlying political, social and economic factors which clearly influenced the response of States to refugee influxes and internal displacements. The international community should provide adequate resources to allow UNHCR to meet its growing challenges. UNHCR should be given the capacity to

intervene in refugee crisis situations and to help to integrate refugees in receiving countries.

22. The refugee issue had been receiving special attention from the Brazilian Government owing to the substantial increase in recent years in the number of refugees in Brazil. The Government had enabled refugees to exercise their civil rights and had facilitated their access to employment by providing identity papers and work permits, as well as attending to their medical and social security needs. UNHCR and the International Confederation of Catholic Charities (ICCC) were helping to integrate refugees into Brazilian society by providing financial assistance and helping to identify job opportunities.

23. Those measures, although important, were still inadequate. Budget limitations faced by UNHCR, and consequent restrictions on monthly financial assistance for refugees, had aggravated the situation.

24. As a part of its national programme of human rights, the Brazilian Government had enacted comprehensive legislation to regulate the refugee situation, and acknowledged grave violation of human rights as a motive for granting refugee status. A national commission for refugees had also been created, including both government and non-governmental representatives, to deal with all matters relating to refugees in Brazil. The Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been endeavouring to expand cooperation among governmental bodies, UNHCR and other interested parties, including ICCC.

25. The issue of extending the UNHCR mandate to encompass assistance to internally displaced persons should be studied with caution, in the light of the lack of resources which had been hampering its ability to fulfil its existing mandate. It might be better to strengthen the role of other agencies with more experience in the area, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. The UNHCR should intervene to help internally displaced persons only in very exceptional situations, on a case-by-case basis.

26. **Mr. Al-Humaimidi** (Iraq) said that refugee problems were not just a matter for sending and receiving countries; they must be resolved through international cooperation. Iraq commended the work of UNHCR and other international aid agencies on the displacement of populations, whether within or between countries. In that regard, his delegation wished to underline the importance of safeguarding the humanitarian mission of UNHCR against external political influence, particularly since certain States had tried to exaggerate the seriousness and scale of refugee crises in order to have a pretext for intervening in the internal affairs of other States.

27. The refugee problem in Iraq was only a recent phenomenon and was wholly the result of the exceptional situation which the country faced as the result of unjustified sanctions and military aggression by allied forces. With fighting between Kurdish factions in the north of the country and armed intervention by neighbouring States, thousands of Iraqis had been forced to flee their homes and seek shelter in other parts of the country or abroad. The only solution was an end to external interference in Iraq's affairs and the return of central control over the whole of the country.

28. **Ms. Dong Zhihua** (China) recalled that there had been no fundamental improvement in the overall refugee situation in the world over the past year. The institution of international protection had been faced with severe challenges, such as the complex problems in the Great Lakes region of Africa, which had seriously hampered humanitarian assistance. At the same time, some developed countries had adopted harsh border-control measures and restrictive asylum policies. Many asylum-seekers who were really in need of international protection had been turned away.

29. UNHCR could not meet the challenges facing it alone; it needed strong support from the international community. Governments must conscientiously fulfil their international obligations, observe basic humanitarian principles, and safeguard the institution of asylum. Meanwhile, the international community should join in efforts to eliminate the root causes in order to prevent new large-scale refugee flows.

30. Voluntary repatriation with both safety and dignity was the ideal solution. The vast majority of refugees were concentrated in poor countries. Many developing countries, in spite of their own limited economic resources, have spent a great deal of human, material and financial resources in hosting refugees, and had made enormous sacrifices in economic, social and environmental fields. However, due support had not been given to their efforts. Recent years had seen a continuous decline in the concern of the international community for some protracted refugee problems. Her delegation called on the international community to understand fully the social and economic impact of large numbers of refugees on developing countries, to support their efforts with concrete measures, share their burden and actively seek lasting solutions.

31. Her delegation noted with satisfaction that the work of UNHCR had been very fruitful over the past year, and expressed its appreciation to the High Commissioner for her dedication and contribution to the humanitarian cause. China hoped that the proposed reform of the United Nations would

strengthen coordination between UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies, and improve the efficiency of the United Nations humanitarian system as a whole. In its future work, UNHCR must adhere strictly to its humanitarian and non-political nature and adopt a cautious attitude towards issues which were not within its mandate.

32. Cooperation between the Chinese Government and UNHCR had continued to develop over the past year. Assistance to the 300,000 Indo-Chinese refugees in China was functioning smoothly, and positive efforts had been made in promoting the repatriation of the remaining Vietnamese boat people and solving the problem of Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong. Her Government looked forward to continuing its cooperation with UNHCR in seeking durable solutions to those problems at an early date. She called upon the international community to extend its support.

33. **Mr. Kumar** (India) paid tribute to the High Commissioner and her staff for the courage and dedication with which they pursued their important humanitarian mandate, sometimes without adequate international backing, and at great risk to themselves.

34. The problems had been compounded by the increasingly harsh nature of current conflicts and the character of resulting refugee flows, the complex ethnic tapestries in the areas affected — which were mostly developing countries already burdened with their own political and economic problems — and the constantly changing impact of social changes and ethnic identities in the regions concerned. There was a need for international cooperation and assistance, and it had to be acknowledged that, notwithstanding difficulties, such assistance had been forthcoming, although it was not always well informed.

35. The resulting paradoxes and dilemmas affected all parties. Refugees seeking asylum faced uncertain environments in their host countries, or repatriation to countries where they feared for their safety or which were devastated by war. Host countries, mainly developing countries with a tradition of providing refuge, were forced to choose between fundamental humanitarian principles and the very real threat to their security and stability posed by large refugee populations. Humanitarian agencies were often forced to choose among untenable options involving equally grave insecurity for refugees, or between extending humanitarian assistance to belligerents taking advantage of civilians in refugee camps or not providing succour to the innocent civilians at all. Aid workers were trapped between concern for the protection of refugees and their own vulnerability.

36. There was a clear link between respect for fundamental principles of refugee protection and the need to address the legitimate political, economic and security concerns of States affected by refugee flows. That implied a much tighter screening of armed elements seeking refugee status that vitiated the civilian character of refugee settlements. A transparent and multilateral process that took into account the interests of all States and the international character of the problem was the best means of ensuring the right balance between the minimum protection refugees must enjoy and the legitimate security concerns of States.

37. Repatriation continued to be the ideal solution to the plight of refugees in situations of mass displacement. However, owing to the scale of the problem and the often fragile and unstable conditions in the country of origin, repatriation could be problematic. That was particularly so where the root causes of conflicts had not yet been resolved. Repatriation at the wrong time not only was a contravention of the rights of refugees but could also endanger prospects for reconciliation and long-term security.

38. Genuine solidarity and burden-sharing was essential. Currently, neither the duty to receive refugees nor the real costs associated with their arrival were fairly apportioned across the world. The distribution of State responsibility towards refugees was based on accidents of geography and the relative ability of States to control their borders. The continued neglect of the impact on developing countries of large refugee populations weakened those countries' continued willingness to provide sanctuary. It was therefore crucial for receiving countries to have the capacity to cope with refugee situations, and for countries of origin to shoulder the impact of large-scale repatriation. Concerted action was required in order to address problems in the countries of origin through assistance to returnees and to the country itself.

39. There was a danger that emergency refugee situations involving mass displacements, which dominated the media, could eclipse other pressing situations crying out for attention. Activities under the General Programmes must continue to receive the support of Governments. Protection issues, the safety of humanitarian personnel, and the need for long-term, political solutions should also be addressed in earnest.

40. **Mr. Troutet** (Canada), expressing his delegation's unequivocal support for the UNHCR, said that recent allegations about the politicization of that body only detracted from its work, threatening the safety of its staff and of other humanitarian personnel. Canada wished to continue an open dialogue with countries facing serious refugee

problems and supported the efforts of UNHCR to establish cooperation with them. At a time of difficulty, it was more important to abide by the provisions of international instruments relating to refugees than to question their basic validity. The 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols were still relevant to current problems.

41. In commending the work of the High Commissioner, his delegation believed that Member States needed to demonstrate the necessary political will to support the work of UNHCR so that it could find lasting solutions and provide humanitarian protection to the refugees entrusted to it by its mandate.

42. **Mrs. Fritsche** (Liechtenstein) said that she welcomed the overall decline in the world's refugee population. She supported the UNHCR strategy of promoting reconciliation and reconstruction in countries of origin since, for the majority of refugees, voluntary repatriation was preferable to a prolonged stay in exile. Women and children represented more than three quarters of all refugees and were among the most vulnerable. Women had special needs, including protection from sexual violence and exploitation, and she therefore welcomed the provision of training in gender issues for UNHCR staff. Children were often the earliest victims of the violence, diseases and malnutrition that accompanied population displacement, unaccompanied minors being at particular risk. UNHCR, as one of the first agencies to intervene in emergencies, was uniquely placed to assist refugee children, and she commended its efforts in that regard.

43. Her Government was deeply concerned at threats to the safety of UNHCR staff. While the adoption of legal instruments would not in itself solve the problem, she was convinced that the 1994 Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel would contribute to enhancing the protection afforded humanitarian workers.

44. In accordance with the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, UNHCR played an important role in determining the application of its provisions. Her Government had sought the advice of UNHCR on a number of issues, including individual asylum applications, and was committed to pursuing its policy of cooperation with the High Commissioner and her staff.

45. **Ms. Parodi** (Argentina) said that in spite of the decrease in the number of refugees over the past year, efforts to assist and protect refugee communities must continue. Argentina, which was a party to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, reiterated its readiness to cooperate with UNHCR. Her Government sought to promote the peaceful solution of conflicts which gave rise to refugee situations and underscored the need to promote respect for human rights and minorities domestically.

46. She underscored the importance of the 1994 San José Declaration on Refugees and Displaced Persons, which aimed at harmonizing legal concepts and mechanisms in order to bring about lasting solutions. In accordance with the declaration, numerous seminars had been conducted in South America to improve legislation on refugees and strengthen national institutions. Argentina supported the establishment of an international humanitarian assistance network that would help to deal with emergencies, and commended the humanitarian aid provided by the White Helmets in the Great Lakes region of Africa at the end of 1996.

47. Argentina, which had sponsored a large number of draft resolutions on the item under consideration, considered that the strictly humanitarian aspect of United Nations work should be amply supported, since the victims were for the most part refugees.

48. **Mr. Kalayanamit** (Thailand) said that only a handful of the large numbers of refugees and illegal immigrants currently in Thailand could be safely repatriated. Thailand continued to offer temporary shelter to refugees, on the proviso that a balance was struck between humanitarianism and national security. Thailand would not allow armed elements to enter the country under false pretences in order to use it as a staging area to conduct activities detrimental to other countries. All refugees had to obey the rule of law and respect Thailand's national interests.

49. In its commitment to offering refugees humanitarian assistance and protection, Thailand had borne high material, social and psychological costs. It had relocated displaced persons from Myanmar in order to protect them from cross-border attacks, and had offered temporary shelter and humanitarian assistance to 50,000 Cambodians. Thailand remained convinced that "safe return" was the only durable solution and was dismayed at the unjust criticism it had received for all the assistance it had offered refugees.

50. UNHCR should act as a catalyst in the repatriation process and should consider preparing safe-return agreements with sending countries. Reintegration could provide a material incentive for repatriation and should address the complex problems arising from the mass exodus of peoples. Recent efforts to create a new framework for cooperation between UNHCR, UNDP, the World Bank and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights were encouraging in that regard.

51. Thailand welcomed the renewed discussion on the implementation of the "cessation clause" in the 1951

Convention, since it would provide a strong incentive for repatriation and would ease the prolonged burden on the international community and receiving countries of those not in need of protection. However, any resulting repatriation should be voluntary. Measures taken to deal with mass exodus were welcome but failed to look at the long term: in particular, consideration should be given to the establishment of "relief transit centres" in countries of origin, which would be less costly to manage and would complement and expedite safe return.

52. **Mr. Fuelleman** (Observer for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)) said that, despite the heavy burdens that a mass influx of refugees imposed, it was vital that States continued to respect the basic principle of non-refoulement. The international community should support expressions of solidarity with civilian refugees and ensure that they were not forced to return to their countries of origin without guarantees for their security and human dignity.

53. It was vital that refugee camps retained their civilian and peaceful character and did not become prey to armed groups using them as military bases. Such groups should be disarmed and interned by the host State and the camps themselves should be sited away from border areas.

54. In 1997, ICRC had provided assistance and protection to victims of war and displaced persons in many parts of the world. In the Great Lakes region of Africa, it had provided water and basic necessities to refugees, had facilitated the return of displaced persons to the Goma and Bukavu regions and had helped reunite families in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda. In Afghanistan, where it had helped a total of 400,000 people, ICRC continued to run medical assistance and agricultural-rehabilitation programmes. In Sri Lanka it had provided medical care in conflict zones, and in a number of States members of the Commonwealth of Independent States it had assisted thousands of displaced persons. In Colombia, ICRC had provided food and travel costs for internally displaced persons.

55. More needed to be done to put a stop to recent massive violations of humanitarian law, which prohibited the forced movement of the civilian population. All States parties to the 1949 Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols should remember their obligations under those instruments. ICRC hoped that its recent work with the United Nations on internal displacement would lead to more effective protection of civilian populations. With regard to protection of humanitarian personnel, consultation between various humanitarian agencies was more important than ever. States needed to do more to safeguard such personnel and should give the issue further consideration at the forthcoming meeting of the States parties to the 1949 Geneva Conventions. In order to preserve its full autonomy, humanitarian activity must be independent of the political and military environment in which it operated.

56. **Mr. Ball** (New Zealand) expressed strong support for the work carried out by UNHCR over the past year and paid particular tribute to its work in repatriating the refugees dispersed throughout the Great Lakes region of Africa. The staff of UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations had done remarkable work in the most difficult circumstances. The dangers faced by humanitarian workers in that region highlighted the need to extend international legal protection to those engaged in humanitarian assistance.

57. New Zealand supported the High Commissioner's recent decision to suspend some of the Office's operations in the Great Lakes region and deeply regretted the violation of international humanitarian principles that had led to that decision. Member States should cooperate with UNHCR to the fullest extent, so that refugees could be protected, assisted and, wherever possible, repatriated. His country, which accepted the responsibility to contribute to the international protection of refugees, received an annual quota of refugees mandated by UNHCR as requiring priority resettlement. His delegation wished to express in the strongest possible terms its support for extending the Office's mandate for a further five years.

58. **Ms. Gligorova** (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) commended the High Commissioner for Refugees and humanitarian workers in the field for their commitment to promoting observance of the fundamental rights of refugees. Since 1992, approximately 60,000 registered refugees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina had found a temporary home in her country, which provided them all with shelter, food, health care, education, and freedom of movement and religion. Although that was a tremendous challenge for her country, it had managed to carry out that task with the cooperation of UNHCR, donor countries and humanitarian organizations.

59. A more innovative and comprehensive approach to the problem of refugees was needed. Integration in their countries of asylum, resettlement in third countries and repatriation required respect for basic human rights and international standards. Lasting solutions could not be achieved unless Governments had the political will to assume their responsibilities under international law pertaining to conflict prevention and resolution. In that respect, her delegation welcomed ideas for developing early-

warning systems and preventive diplomacy aimed at the peaceful settlement of conflicts in their early stages and stressed the unconditionality of the repatriation of refugees and displaced persons. Lastly, she expressed her delegation's strong support for the Office's efforts aimed at institutional reform.

60. **Mr. Bogoreh** (Djibouti) condemned the attacks against the United Nations and associated humanitarian personnel and the use of force against refugees and civilians, and urged all States to respect their obligations under the 1951 Convention. On the other hand, the international community should understand the problems encountered by host countries, particularly poor, small countries with insufficient socio-economic infrastructure. While it was gratifying to note the decrease in the overall number of refugees, their number was still too high and required a lasting solution. While the organization of regional conferences could be a step in that direction, the real solution lay in eliminating the reasons for conflict through development assistance and combating poverty.

61. His delegation supported the work of the High Commissioner in providing assistance to refugee children and adolescents fleeing armed conflicts. It regretted that the *coup d'état* in Sierra Leone had made it impossible to continue voluntary repatriation. It hoped that UNITA in Angola would act immediately in accordance with the Lusaka Protocol, which was the only way to strengthen trust and encourage refugees to return home. While some progress had been made in East Africa, the situation in Somalia remained a source of concern. He hoped the Somali warlords would act in accordance with the interest of their people and permit the thousands of refugees scattered throughout the subregion to return home. While it was the task of the Somalis themselves to make peace, the international community should assist them in reconstructing their war-ravaged country.

62. Djibouti had long been a host country for thousands of refugees, in spite of its limited resources. However, the growing number of displaced persons, together with a constant influx of clandestine immigrants seeking jobs and assistance, had become a subject of major concern. After the armed conflict in northern Djibouti, his Government had undertaken a major reconstruction and rehabilitation programme in the areas affected. That programme could achieve its objectives only with the assistance of the donor countries and the United Nations specialized agencies.

63. He pointed out that, while the large number of refugees and displaced persons was certainly a major obstacle to sustained development, almost all conflicts which displaced population groups were rooted in economic and social difficulties precisely at a time when development assistance was diminishing from year to year.

64. **Mr. Bull** (Liberia) said that, despite the encouraging decrease in the number of refugees in the world, it was disturbing that the number of internally displaced persons continued to grow because of more intense conflicts and that there were new obstacles to obtaining asylum. His delegation was concerned about national policies resulting in refoulement and restrictive measures that prevented refugees and stateless persons from obtaining refugee status and the benefits associated with it. In that regard, he welcomed the fact that UNHCR was continuing to hold consultations with a number of States on international protection.

65. Africa was most affected by the refugee problem, which had severely impaired its development. Liberia believed that voluntary repatriation was the preferred way to alleviate the refugee crisis and welcomed the High Commissioner's decision to consult with development agencies in implementing programmes to help repatriated refugees as well as address the root causes of refugee flows. His delegation supported the Office's policy of emergency preparedness and response and noted that UNHCR was enhancing the use of quick-impact projects and microfinance schemes, which were of particular relevance to his country's rehabilitation efforts.

66. One of the priorities of the newly elected Government in Liberia was the repatriation of Liberian refugees and the resettlement of internally displaced persons, especially women and minors. Liberia was encouraged that the Office intended to repatriate nearly 500,000 Liberian refugees by the end of 1998, and would continue its collaboration. He expressed the hope that the Office would be given all the necessary financial support and receive the cooperation of host countries.

67. **Mr. Nikiforov** (Russian Federation) said that his country attached particular importance to the implementation of the Programme of Action adopted at the 1996 Geneva Conference on refugees in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and neighbouring States. The implementation of the Programme, which was an important factor for increasing stability, was a major political priority of the Russian Federation. Under the Programme, the CIS countries had succeeded in strengthening the legislative and institutional basis for forced and illegal migration, enhancing treaty relations and introducing a preventive aspect to conflict settlement. However, the lack of internal resources for implementing the Programme was a major impediment.

68. As a result of the steps taken by the CIS countries, the approximately 60 million people living outside their ethnic homelands after the disintegration of the Soviet Union had not become a threat to the security and stability of neighbouring States. The more than 4.5 million people who had resettled in Russia from CIS countries and the Baltic States had not become refugees, because of the timely adoption of legislation on citizenship and forced migration. The Russian Federation's enhanced cooperation with other CIS countries had made it possible to conduct the resettlement process on the basis of treaties.

69. UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and non-governmental organizations had made a noticeable contribution to upgrading analytical and information capacities. Accordingly, the Russian Federation advocated greater cooperation among all participants in the Geneva conference and greater use of the potential of non-governmental organizations. Mass population movements into the Russian Federation were likely to continue until the beginning of the twenty-first century, resulting in an additional 3.5 million people living there. It was essential to eliminate the reasons for forced displacement, *inter alia*, through careful monitoring and preventive action. Failure to implement the Programme of Action could have serious consequences in the future.

70. In spite of its serious budgetary limitations, the Russian Federation was meeting the needs of refugees and involuntarily displaced persons as part of its migration policy, and hoped that UNHCR would continue its efforts to ensure greater coordination with IOM and OSCE, particularly with regard to assistance in implementing Russian regional migration programmes. That would be a real contribution to enhancing his country's ability to solve the broad range of problems regarding forced migration.

71. He hoped that the draft resolution which the Russian Federation, together with the other countries concerned, would submit on the question would be unanimously supported, as in the previous year.

72. **Mr. Park Soo Gil** (Republic of Korea) said that, despite the decline in the world's refugee population over the past year, vast numbers of people continued to flee their homes to escape persecution and violence, and the international community must make a concerted effort to tackle that problem.

73. While much progress had been made since the adoption of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, the current trend in some parts of the world towards restrictive asylum policies was deeply worrying. He urged States to consider as an alternative the concept of "temporary protection", whereby the principle of refugee protection could be upheld and the legitimate concerns of States simultaneously taken into account. Under no circumstances, however, should the principle of non-refoulement be compromised.

74. In the current economic climate, the integration of refugees into the population of host countries was problematic, making repatriation the preferred solution. He therefore supported the quick-impact projects of UNHCR, aimed at providing immediate assistance to returnees. He also welcomed the efforts of UNHCR to enhance cooperation with the various development agencies and financial institutions, in particular the World Bank, since coordination of their activities was vital to the success of repatriation programmes. The establishment of the new Office of the Emergency Relief Coordinator to replace the Department of Humanitarian Affairs was another positive step.

75. The international community must strengthen its efforts to promote and protect human rights, particularly those of the most vulnerable groups, since the observance of international human rights standards was a crucial element of both prevention and refugee protection. The situation of refugee women and children called for special attention, and he welcomed the UNHCR initiatives launched to that end, including the Reference Group for Refugee Women and the worldwide evaluation of programmes for refugee children and adolescents.

76. His Government was deeply concerned at threats to the security of humanitarian personnel. During its presidency of the Security Council, it had convened a debate on the theme "Protection for humanitarian assistance to refugees and others in conflict situations", leading to the adoption of presidential statement S/PRST/1997/34.

77. The resolution of the problem of refugees was in the interests of all countries. His own Government had substantially increased its contributions to UNHCR programmes, and was committed to working closely with other Member States and the United Nations system towards that goal.

78. **Mr. Staehelin** (Observer for Switzerland) said that, while the recent decline in the world's refugee population was encouraging, other developments, particularly in the Great Lakes region of Africa, had presented UNHCR with unprecedented challenges. The problem of the militarization of refugee camps in the region had forced the international community to re-evaluate the link between humanitarian

assistance and political action in response to emergency situations.

79. With regard to repatriation, it was crucial to establish political, social and economic conditions conducive to the return of refugees. UNHCR could not undertake that task alone, and he therefore called upon the development agencies and financial institutions, as well as the States concerned, to contribute their efforts to that end. The signing of memoranda of understanding with a number of other United Nations bodies was a first step. All organs involved should indicate clearly what forms the cooperation between them would take. He also welcomed the Secretary-General's efforts to strengthen inter-agency coordination. Special attention should be paid to achieving an optimum distribution of labour among the various agencies, and the fact that a number of humanitarian agencies had their headquarters in Geneva must be taken into account.

80. He paid tribute to the courage of UNHCR staff, and urged all Member States to reflect upon how best to enhance their safety.

81. **Mr. Sergiwa** (Libyan Arab Jamahiriya) said that the growing number of refugees and displaced persons in various parts of Africa, including the Great Lakes region, not only represented an unprecedented challenge for UNHCR, but also imposed additional social and economic burdens on receiving countries. The international community, donor countries, financial institutions and United Nations agencies should support UNHCR and other agencies in their work on integration and voluntary repatriation, the only durable solutions since they attacked the problem at its roots. UNHCR personnel were to be commended for helping in the repatriation of refugees and for providing protection and assistance to vulnerable groups such as women and children, often at great personal risk.

82. With regard to the refugee situation on the border between Egypt and the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, described in the Commissioner's report (A/52/12, para. 206), his delegation wished to make it clear that the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya had never forced any Palestinian to return home. Indeed, it had provided and continued to provide refuge to huge numbers of Palestinians who had been forcibly removed from their homes in one of the worst examples of illegal occupation. The Palestinians in question had decided to return home after the signing of the Oslo peace agreements. However, when the Israeli authorities had denied them permission to return, the Libyan Government had in fact provided them with humanitarian assistance and allowed them to return to the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya.

83. **Ms. Tolle** (Kenya) said that, as the situation in the Great Lakes region of Africa had shown, massive exoduses of refugees could lead to insecurity in the countries to which they fled and in surrounding States. Kenya was therefore working through the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) to create conditions in the countries of origin conducive to their return. While much progress had been made, donor countries must continue their support for that initiative.

84. Kenya was itself a host country to thousands of refugees, and her Government was grateful to UNHCR for its assistance in dealing with them.

85. In the light of the recent attacks on UNHCR personnel and the steady erosion of fundamental humanitarian principles, particularly in the Great Lakes region, she called on the Governments concerned to reaffirm their commitment to uphold international humanitarian law.

86. Since voluntary repatriation represented the best durable solution, it was imperative to address the situation in countries to which refugees were returning and to provide adequate reintegration programmes.

87. Her Government welcomed the cooperation between UNHCR and the various development and human rights agencies, and supported the Secretary-General's efforts to develop an integrated system-wide United Nations strategy for action at country level to facilitate repatriation.

88. The burden on asylum States, many of which were developing countries, had been exacerbated by the decline in financial assistance. It was vital that States which had pledged donations to UNHCR honoured those pledges in a timely fashion in order to facilitate the smooth and prompt implementation of UNHCR programmes. The resolution of the problem of refugees was the responsibility of the whole international community.

89. **Ms. Samah** (Algeria) said that, while the world's refugee population had declined by some 1 million, there remained more than 26 million persons of concern to UNHCR of whom the overwhelming majority, particularly in Africa, lived in utter destitution. All refugees hoped to return to their homeland. However, until that hope could be realized, it was the duty of the international community to ensure that they lived in more humane conditions. Despite the vast scope of its programmes and its commendable efforts, UNHCR could not tackle the refugee problem alone and required enhanced support from Member States.

90. Almost two thirds of the world's refugee population was in Africa, and their needs far outstripped the capacities and resources of the host countries. Her own Government,

which was providing assistance to refugees from the conflict in Western Sahara, would welcome additional support from UNHCR. It was also assisting displaced persons from Mali and the Niger and was working with the Governments of those countries to facilitate return and reintegration.

91. Algeria would pursue its policy of providing assistance to refugees and displaced persons and, at the same time, addressing the underlying causes of forced population movements.

The meeting rose at 12.45 p.m.